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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compile and analyze the distance learning accreditation policies for higher education according to the six regional accreditation commissions. A self-report survey mailed to the directors of the six regional accrediting commissions was completed by all the commissions: (1) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges; (2) New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Higher Education; (3) Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Colleges; (4) Western Association of Colleges, Association of Colleges; (5) Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education; and (6) North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Learning. All the commissions rely on the Guidelines for Distance Education, an expansion of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education principles, as the base for their accreditation policies. Current distance education, responses make clear, is trying to adjust to the recent explosion of Web-based instruction. Commissions have set differing guidelines that contain differing degrees of detail. The largest gap in policy among the commissions currently is whether to accredit the distance programs within the normal institutional review, treat them as separate from usual accreditation processes, or combine the two approaches. All commissions agreed that distance education is expanding rapidly, and all agree that flexibility in policy is absolutely essential in adjusting to the constant growth of technology in education. Some recommendations are made for improving the accreditation of distance education programs. Three appendixes contain the survey and supporting materials used in the study. (Contains 25 references.) (SLD)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION ACCREDITATION STANDARDS ACCORDING TO THE REGIONAL ACCREDITATION COMMISSIONS

by

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B.S., Radford University, 1993

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Need for Study

The technology revolution has radically changed many fields. In the education realm, higher education is under what could become a massive transformation in not just how classes are brought to the student, but how they are taught. Distance education has been putting students, not instructors, at the center of the learning process utilizing collaborative and distributed learning models that fully integrate technology into the learning process (Western Association of Schools and Colleges [WASC], 1999).

Each year, an estimated three million Americans pursue education through what is known as distance education, and that number grows every year (Distance Education and Training Council [DETC], 1999). Distance education has been continuously growing as the modern workforce demands cheaper classes at non-traditional hours, and as schools look for more cost-effective ways to provide educational services to a broader population.

A recent U.S. Department of Education study reported that three-quarters of large institutions and two-thirds of medium sized institutions now offer courses using distance learning (WASC, 1999). These include top research universities, such as Duke and Harvard. Future plans indicate that up to 90% of large institutions and 85% of medium sized ones will soon offer distance education (WASC, 1999). This educational change is something that the accrediting community must be prepared to address.

Yet, as is almost always the case with new advances, technology grows faster than rules and guidelines can be applied. An enormous amount of research is available on the

growing science of distance learning, but very little on the review of standards and quality in addressing student's needs. Only recently has the accreditation community even tackled the issue of distance learning accreditation.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation, CHEA, claimed that American higher education is the envy of the world, leading in both the development of new knowledge as well as the proportion of its population that goes to college (CHEA, 1999). CHEA has argued that the reason for this has been the distinctive American system of self-governing accreditation. Unlike other nations, where higher education is monitored by the national government, the American accreditation system relies successfully on peer review with numerous and diverse institutions. Top quality standards have been produced with this form of peer review, but the big question is how standards can be maintained with the greater freedom and autonomy that distance education demands.

Although distance education has received a lot more attention in the past few years, the last and only major study done on distance learning accreditation still shows conflicting guidelines among the regional commissions, and even less consensus on how to resolve these issues (Danley, 1997). Clearly, a new study is needed to address the issue.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to compile and analyze the distance learning accreditation policies for higher education according to the six regional accreditation commissions. The results may be used as a standard for future policy making.

Statement of Problem

The problem addressed in this research was: What are the higher education accrediting standards for distance learning?

Research Questions

1. How do the distance education accreditation policies vary among the accrediting commissions?
2. What current distance learning issues are facing the accrediting commissions?
3. How do the accrediting commissions plan to respond to the role that they predict distance education will play in the near future?

Definition of Terms

Higher Education: The level of education, beyond a high school diploma, at an Associate's level or higher.

Accrediting Institutions: Recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education as reliable authorities concerning the quality of postsecondary education or training offered by educational institutions or programs (Department of Education, 1992).

Distance Education: Also referred to as Distance Learning. Enrollment and study with an educational institution that provides learning materials for study by students at the location and time of their choosing (DETC, 1999).

Accreditation: Process that gives public recognition to institutions that meet certain standards and a validation of the schools promise to provide the quality of education it claims to offer (DETC, 1999).

Distance Education Accreditation Policies: A set of principles or standards designed to be applicable to a broad range of technologically-based, credit-bearing, distance education programming to assure that it is characterized by the same concerns for quality, integrity, and effectiveness that apply to campus-based instruction (NEASC,1999).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

Introduction

The problem addressed in this research was: What are the higher education accrediting standards for distance learning? In order to understand the impact of current accrediting standards on distance learning, it is important to understand how the current policy developed. The first section of this chapter will explore the evolution of modern distance learning and the accreditation policies that attempted to keep up with the changing technology. The next section will investigate the past studies on distance learning accreditation and the final section will summarize the conclusions of the research.

Evolution of Distance Learning Accreditation

Distance learning, for the purposes of accreditation review, has been defined as a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools [NCA], 1999). Admittedly, one could argue with this definition that distance learning has been in place in some form for centuries. To narrow the field, the modern definition of distance learning should require that it carry some form of electronic media. In this case, distance learning's roots can be traced to "Instructional Television", (ITV), or as was more commonly known, "telecoursing".

Amarillo College of Texas created a degree program in Speech and Drama using closed-circuit television in 1955 (Sapper, 1982). The success of that program led to a 1958 Board of Regents decision to broadcast a live English course early in the morning with the cooperation of a local CBS affiliate. Soon, other colleges followed suit by broadcasting live, early-morning courses. However, telecourses really didn't catch on until the 1970s with the introduction of videotape, editing machines, and cable. Telecourses expanded to several institutions, but distance education still had a very negative connotation. For the most part, the nations most interested in developing distance learning programs prior to 1980 were underdeveloped nations.

Nicaragua, Mexico, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and many nations of Africa were very interested in producing cheap, effective ways to reach a spread-out, rural populace. In fact, at that time most information on distance education came from third-world countries. These nations produced extensive case studies and reports on the effects of distance education, while the U.S., although using telecourses at several institutions, disregarded the phenomenon as a novelty (Hakemulder, 1979). This is quite ironic given that today the term "distance education" is normally equated with cutting-edge technology primarily being used by rich, industrialized nations.

Telecoursing wasn't yet prominent enough to attract major attention for a serious study, much less from an accreditation agency. The closest agency to show an interest was the National Home Study Council, which at that time primarily concentrated on home schooling and correspondence education. In a 1979 booklet that was designed to tout the benefits of home study, the NHSC pointed out the fallacies of televised training. Although it admitted that it was fundamentally a good concept, it claimed telecourses

often provided "inadequate training" and were normally "too short" as well as inflexible to student's needs (Poteet, 1979). That all changed in 1981 when a major benchmark in telecoursing occurred.

The Adult Learning Division of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) devised the PTV-3 program in October 1981 that brought college credit telecourses to over 50,000 viewers across the nation (Zigerel, 1982). Suddenly, telecourses expanded rapidly throughout the U.S. As a matter of fact, a few colleges sprouted that only used instructional television. Furthermore, in a complete turnaround, the National Home Study Council made a bid to be acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Education as the primary accrediting body for distance education institutions. In order to do this, a member of the organization called on the affiliate institutions to come up with as many quality distant learning programs as possible (Phillips, 1982).

This tactic apparently worked, since today the NHSC, now renamed the Distance Education and Training Council, does receive recognition from the U.S. Department of Education as being the "nationally recognized accrediting agency" for distance education institutions (DETC, 2000). This new way of teaching was certainly on the rise. However, telecoursing was not without its critics.

Despite the apparent success, the one-year evaluation of the program brought intense criticism from faculty members across the nation. Several did research voicing concerns that ranged from the very concept of using the TV as a teacher, to practical concerns such as cost, timeliness, fees, exclusivity of classes, and poor quality (Schwartz, 1982; Smith, 1982). However, in spite of the critics, telecoursing continued to grow.

Even the most ardent critics of distance learning admitted there were modest places for it. The fact was that the issue of accreditation had to be addressed.

In 1984, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), the overseeing agency for the regional accrediting agencies, commissioned the first major study in distance learning accreditation. COPA recognized the problems they had with the explosion of the extension centers in the 1960s and 1970s, and admitted that the frantic "catch up game" played by the regional commissions were more reactive and restrictive than if they had acted earlier (Council on Postsecondary Accreditation [COPA], 1991). Thus, "Project ALLTEL", an acronym for the "Project on Assessing Long Distance Learning via Telecommunications", was born. The study focused on the principles and policies of distance learning, and the results were published in a small document that became a benchmark for the distance learning policies of the regional accrediting commissions.

In 1991, COPA held a symposium entirely devoted to the accreditation processes of distance learning, and the emerging issues that developed since the Project ALLTEL study took place. The primary issues at the symposium were whether distance education courses should be judged the same as their classroom equivalent, how the states were handling distance learning programs being beamed across their borders, and the differing standards between accrediting agencies (COPA, 1991).

A few suggestions that emerged out of the symposium were implemented by some of the regional accrediting agencies. These included updating the makeup of site visitation teams with a distance learning expert, and implementing new requirements for

interim inspections when a school suddenly decides to create a distance education program (Danley, 1997; WASC, 1999).

The growth of distance learning has been rapid in the nation, and probably none more prevalent than in the Western region. Because of its large geography and widely dispersed populations, the postsecondary institutions in the West became the national leaders in providing distance education programs (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education [WICHE], 1996). Not believing the current standards were adequate, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications of the WICHE developed a framework for institutions designing distance learning programs called the "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs" (WICHE, 1996). These principles, hereafter referred to as the "WICHE Principles", were not meant to serve as a substitute for the standards for accreditation of agencies (Danley, 1997).

The WICHE Principles included a section on institutional context and commitment that called for faculty support services, training for faculty who use distance education, and a commitment for continuation of distance education programs to allow a student to complete a degree. These principles also included a section on evaluation and assessment that necessitated measuring student retention and satisfaction. That section also stated those students should have access to all evaluation data. The WICHE Principles have now become the first generally accepted basis throughout the country for evaluating distant learning programs.

Later that same year in 1996, another set of principles surfaced from the American Council on Education (ACE), entitled the "Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a

Learning Society". These principles, hereafter referred to as the "ACE Principles", focused on four key issues - the impact of technology advances, quality assurance, student-centered programs, and core values in a learning society. What primarily set the ACE Principles apart from the WICHE Principles was the emphasis on core values (Danley, 1997). The values moved the guidelines away from a "strict focus on distance learning, placing distance learning within the larger institutional context" (Danley, 1997, p. 81).

Although the WICHE Principles have been acknowledged by the six regional accrediting agencies, further developments and cooperation among the agencies continue. In order to facilitate the evaluation of distance education throughout the United States, the regional accrediting associations have recently agreed to an extension of the WICHE Principles with an update known simply as the "Guidelines for Distance Education". The endorsement by all of the U.S. regional accrediting commissions reflect an emerging national consensus on good practices in specific educational areas (NCA, 1999).

These guidelines, as well as any future guidelines, are all considered to be working documents that are subject to revision as institutions continue to engage in new initiatives. At present are issues concerning the necessity for distance education programs to be integrated into the approval, planning, and budgeting processes by which institutions as a whole are governed (Lezberg, 1999).

Although difficult, distance learning is a change worth accommodating (CHEA, 1999). The challenges the agencies continue to face with distance learning were met with support from the U.S. Senate reporting on its version (S-1882) of the Higher Education Amendments (3105-181). It stated, "The committee has observed that a number of

recognized accrediting organizations have increased their capacity to deal with the new forms of distance education" (Lezberg, 1999, p. 28).

Research on Distance Learning Accreditation

As stated earlier, the first major study on distance learning accreditation was Project ALLTEL (Chaloux, 1985). This two-year study, employing a series of task forces and advisory committees, designed a set of fundamental guidelines for standards in distance education. Despite the absence of the Internet, this study was the benchmark for future policies in accreditation of distance learning. It focused on three areas: general principles, procedures, and implementation.

The first area can be summarized by stating that an institution's distance learning programs should fit their organizational mission, and be strongly regulated but not to the point of discouraging innovation. Under the procedures section, the study called for the accrediting agencies to work closely with COPA and each other in order to have a consistency in policies. The study also spelled out a strategy for institutions that wished to implement a new distance education program. To summarize, the institution should provide documentation on objectives, instructional support, and proof of quality to their respective regional accrediting agency.

Finally, since there was no clear legal definition of "physical presence" of an institution when it teaches across state borders, the study addressed what it should do when deciding to seek state authorization (Chaloux, 1985). This made a significant difference for the issue of teacher certification, since there was a legitimate question as to whether a teacher needed to be certified in all of the states he/she would be broadcasting

into. One author posed the question of what a Texas teacher would have to do, using Texas approved textbooks and curriculum, if that teacher wanted to teach electronically to a student in Massachusetts (Clark, 1989).

The study concluded that the act of transmitting an electronic signal into another state, as well as using interstate mail or phone services, did not constitute physical presence. However, licensed institutional representatives, such as recruiters or support staff, would in most instances establish physical presence. The distant instructor was to be viewed as part of the "instructional package", to include the learning materials, and therefore did not require state certification in most instances except from the institution where the instructor taught from (Levinson, 1984).

Project ALLTEL's confirmation of not requiring teachers to receive multiple certifications was well received by the institutions. One of the first studies to evaluate distance learning found that only 70% of the teachers involved in distance education met the certification standards applicable to conventional teaching (Sims, 1982). That was just one of the distance education issues Sims addressed in a 19-page questionnaire sent to several universities. Sims also found that 84% of the courses were considered "comparable " to regular courses, and that 82% of the courses were awarded the same academic recognition as their on-campus counterparts.

Just six years later, another study showed how far acceptance of distance education courses had come. Brey (1990) sent a survey to colleges utilizing telecourses. One of the questions on the survey that Brey used asked if the telecourses offered the same credit hours as their on-campus counterparts. The results showed a staggering 97.1% of the telecourses offered the same credit as their traditional equivalent.

A large influence on accreditation is the current attitudes towards distance education. One study for a doctoral thesis at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale did attempt to gauge faculty attitudes towards distance learning in U.S. public higher education (Clark, 1992). Mail surveys were sent out to various faculty members at U.S. public research universities, public comprehensive institutions, and two-year colleges relating to attitudes on distance learning. With a response rate of 66%, results yielded slightly positive attitudes towards distance learning, suggesting a "cautious optimism" was warranted (Clark, 1992).

Finally, one of the only major studies to be done comparing the distance education accreditation policies of the regional commissions was finished in 1997. Danley (1997) conducted a study using a mail survey of six regional accrediting agencies focusing on their current policies for distance learning. The response rate was 100%. Although Project ALLTEL and the WICHE Principles called for a consistency in the policies, the results showed a very different array of procedures for accreditation. Many of the accreditation commissions adapted the WICHE Principles, but some added complex, separate standards. For others, it was a matter of principle to ensure consistency across programs through guidelines that do not address how learning is delivered (Danley, 1997).

Summary of Literature and Research

Literature and research reflect an attempt to figure out how to deal with the confusion of the accreditation processes caused by the rapidly growing technological field of distance learning.

Studies, conferences, and symposiums on distance learning accreditation policies seem to agree to the need for consistency when devising policies, as well as the need to maintain high standards of quality, but not to the extent of being restrictive or stifling for innovation to occur.

Finally, distance education is becoming more and more accepted as a form of delivering instruction, as evidenced by the number of universities now employing distance education and the amount of credit that is given.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Description of Research Type

A descriptive research method utilizing a mailed, self-report survey instrument was used to conduct the study. Best and Kahn (1998) stated, "Descriptive research is concerned with the analysis of the relationships between non-manipulated variables and the development of generalizations, extending its conclusion beyond the sample observed" (p. 139). The survey method was chosen as the most appropriate choice for this research project.

Subjects

The population for the study consisted of the six regional accrediting commissions for higher education. The Department of Education recognizes the six regional commissions as the primary authority over their respective regions concerning the quality of postsecondary education. They are listed as follows:

1. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges
2. New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Higher Education
3. Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Colleges
4. Western Association of Colleges, Association of Colleges
5. Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education

6. North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Learning

All six of these organizations participated in the study. Each regional accreditation commission has an executive or associate director that specializes in distance learning issues. These directors were contacted, and they agreed to participate by filling out the questionnaire and sending their respective agency's current policies and guidelines. One hundred percent of the surveys were returned.

Data Collection Instrument

The survey was based on the validated instrument used by Dr. Barbara Danley for her study on distance learning accreditation in 1997. The Human Subjects Committee of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale also reviewed and approved of the survey on June 20, 2000 (Appendix B). The introduction defined and clarified distance education for the purpose of the survey. The survey consisted of seven open-ended questions. The first question asked to what set of principles the commission subscribes. The next three questions dealt with how the respective commission currently handles accountability of standards in its accreditation procedures. The final three questions dealt with pressing issues and roles the commissions will play concerning distance education now and in the future (Appendix A).

All answers were written directly on the survey and returned in a self-addressed stamped envelope. In addition to the survey, all the agencies involved sent their current policy statements on distance education accreditation.

Procedures

Before the surveys were distributed, all six agencies were contacted and asked to send their current updated policies on distance learning accreditation. Once all commissions responded, by either mailing a packet or faxing the material, the next phase involved mailing out the questionnaires. For this process, six envelopes affixed with an address label containing a cover letter (Appendix C), a copy of the survey, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope were sent to the distance learning coordinator at each accrediting agency. Finally, a follow-up telephone or email conversation was conducted for any clarification of answers that were given on the survey.

Data Analysis

The data from the surveys along with the commission policies were analyzed for commonalties and differences. Returned surveys were checked for completion. All six surveys were fully completed.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The problem addressed in this research was: What are the higher education accrediting standards for distance learning? Data collected from this study were obtained from questionnaires sent to six associate directors from each commission who were pre-selected due to their role as an authority on distance learning accreditation issues. The questions were relative to the research.

Research Question Results

All of the commissions have one thing in common when it comes to separate standards for distance education programs as compared to traditional programs: Each of them claim to follow the "Guidelines for Distance Learning", an expansion on the basic framework of the "Principles of Good Practice" as laid out by the Western Interstate Cooperative. However, whereas some of the commissions only rely on that set of guidelines, the others have either additional policies or even separate standards concerning the development of distance education programs.

Research Question #1: How did the distance education policies vary among accreditation institutions?

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

In addition to adhering to the Guidelines based on the WICHE Principles, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is the only one out of the six that has very specific, separate standards for the evaluation of distance learning activities to

ensure quality comparability to the traditional courses. SACS is unique in treating a new online program the same way as if a college was interested in setting up a branch campus. In fact, in both cases the college would receive the same packet entitled "Substantive Change Procedure C".

SACS also provides guidelines entitled "Planning Distance Learning Activities". It demands that an assessment of need be completed as well as a written relationship stating how the new program fits into the institution's overall mission. The school must provide information in many areas: How they will orient the faculty to the new technology; how they will make arrangements for those needing school resources, how they will make special arrangements for grading, and what process they will use to assure quality of the program.

SACS also encourages review of the WICHE Principles in the planning guidelines. For evaluation of distance learning programs, SACS has developed a set of guidelines for that as well. It demands a separate section in the final accreditation report for distance learning programs, and also offers a six section guide on the types of questions to expect when interviewing personnel related to the distance programs. It is the only commission out of the six that provides this type of information.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

When asked if the North Central Association (NCA) had special procedures for accreditation of distance learning programs, NCA responded by saying that they accredit entire institutions, rather than individual programs within those institutions. This commission is adamant about not having a separate set of standards of any kind for a specific program, to include a new distance program. In fact, in 1997 NCA responded to

Danley's study be stating that one of the biggest issues for them was fending off people who thought that distance education should be treated separately.

NCA responds to the question of how equal quality is ensured for a distance course by claiming to look carefully at the support structures around the basic curriculum, ranging from information services to student services. The goal that NCA holds is that of intent. They argue that many support services need to be "comparable" rather than "equal" – since distance courses require services that are not necessary for traditional classes. An example they give is a proctored exam, which is not usually necessary for a traditional course.

In addition, the accreditation team will conduct interviews and enter the online environment to ensure that those services are actually provided to the distant student, as well as study the technologies and support systems described by the institution.

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges

The New England Association subscribes to the WICHE Principles and the expanded Guidelines for Distance Education, however, they arranged it to meet their own specifications. For example, New England made a separate section for Organization and Governance whereas it was put together under in Curriculum and Instruction in the Guidelines.

A few additions were added. New England requires the institution to ensure access to laboratories and facilities in addition to equipment and technical expertise under Physical Resources, and requires that course and degree requirements be disclosed under their Public Disclosure section. New England also added a section on integrity. Other than that, no separate guidelines were presented.

New England is identical in philosophy with Northwest in believing that a new distant education program only warrants a self-study and a proposal for institutional change. The institutions need only to justify how the program fits into their overall purpose for accreditation.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Western recently created a separate set of standards for distance education programs it calls the New Framework for Off-Campus and Substantive Change Proposals. Western created this framework to assure a thorough peer review process of distance-education programs in a timely manner (WASC, 2000). Western takes a different approach than North Central in insisting that the distance program itself be separately evaluated. However, it does make a provision for colleges that offer a substantial number of distance programs by agreeing to encompass the distance programs to their overall institutional review process, rather than program-by-program, if the institution has established a good track record.

The institution having initiated no less than three successful distance proposals can apply for their distance programs to be absorbed within the institutional review. The institution would have to submit a report on their capabilities and allow for a site visit by Western. If approved, the institution would be granted a term of institutional review for four years.

The institutional changes would be renewable for consecutive four-year terms, based on the submission of an updated report and a site visit validating continuing institutional capacity in this area as well as the quality of program offerings. In most

cases, this institutional review would be separate from the regular institutional accreditation review process.

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges

Northwest provides a mechanism for approval of distance education courses in their accreditation handbook under Substantive Change. To get approval, the institution must show a clearly defined purpose for the program in relation to the institution's overall mission. Besides that, Northwest uses the same basic guidelines the other commissions use. Northwest condensed the WICHE Principles and the expanded guidelines into a single commission policy. No separate set of standards currently exists otherwise.

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools

Although Middle States Association strongly asserts that there is no separate standard concerning accreditation, all institutions that fall under their region are sent a separate set of guidelines in a 10-page document that accompanies the WICHE Principles. This guide, according to their response, seeks to ensure "comparability" between the services offered to students on-site and the services offered to distance learning students. For example, instead of simply stating that the institution must demonstrate technical support, the document requires that the instructor have access to computers, fax machines, and long distance telephone lines in order to integrate with the students.

The document also includes sections on Effectiveness and Outcomes, Human Resources, Facilities, Promotional Materials, and something WICHE didn't even address—Intellectual Property Rights. Middle States requests the institutions to develop their own policies in addressing that issue.

Research Question #2: What current distance learning issues are facing the accrediting institutions?

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

The Southern Association was concerned with "comparability" issues in relation to other courses. They were concerned with how support services, such as libraries, would be dealt with for students at great distances in rural areas. Other concerns were appropriate interaction between students and faculty, and their ability to use the technology. Finally, Southern was concerned with the process by which institutions used to ensure that grades are awarded for pertinent accomplishments.

North Central Association of Schools and Colleges

The primary issue for this commission is the speed with which universities and colleges are moving into online education. Specifically, the response was focused on online services that help faculty move into a web environment almost immediately, which puts a lot of pressure on NCA to fulfill their responsibility of testifying to quality. However, the concern has less to do with curriculum for the student than support of the student learning environment. In other words, online education is considered by NCA to be simply correspondence education, and good correspondence education is good education.

Finally, highly interactive and individualized learning presumes to be expensive. This will require colleges to partner with other colleges and even businesses to meet this need. Since accreditation assumes institutional autonomy, then the "institutional" focus may not serve well in the new multi-player environment.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

The New England Association asked if the faculty member must create, deliver, and evaluate the student learning in this new environment. Technology allows for an unbundling of faculty roles that might be terrifying to many. The core roles will be both the one who develops the curriculum and the one who assesses its effectiveness.

Integrity is the other issue of concern. The ability to cheat seems greater with online courses, and must be addressed as technology expands.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

An issue with this association is faculty acceptance of distance learning. It would be very difficult for a school to have a successful program if not supported by the faculty and staff. Another concern is that distance education programs not become separate, stand-alone entities unrelated to the institutional mission. As technology influences the teaching and learning process, it is important for institutions to incorporate these programs into the larger whole so that faculty and administration have opportunities to learn more about the kinds of learning taking place with these innovative programs.

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges

The only current issue of primary concern for Northwest is the growth of consortia for the collective development and delivery of distance learning programs.

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools

Two issues for Middle States are student learning outcomes and access to appropriate library and learning resources. With the first issue, the commission wondered how the institution will determine if students are learning and how the institution will ensure that the specific learning outcomes will be realized. With the second issue, the commission asked how the institutions would know if the resources for the distance

courses would be both adequate and appropriate, and how it would ensure access to them. Furthermore, the commission asked if the students would even have the skills needed to make good judgments about the quality of the resources.

Research Question #3: How will distance education accreditation policies continue to evolve?

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Distance education is becoming and will continue to become an increasingly used option for students to use across the nation. Southern claims that it is even foreseeable that distance education might soon become more prevalent than traditional classroom learning. The commissions must adapt the evaluations to the new technology, and put more emphasis on outcome assessments rather than the typical structural or organizational concerns.

North Central Association of Schools and Colleges

In the near future, almost every institution will be involved in distance education in some form or another. North Central claims that this will present colleges with the opportunity to extend the scope of their enterprise on a scale that they have never had before – and the competition will become very fierce. NCA will continue to be in the business of defining evidence of quality, but it adds that it will be quality of learning rather than quality of provision of learning experiences.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

The New England Association simply stated that distance education would be an increasing factor over the years, with more institutions using it and offering more ways to

deliver it. With all of the constant transformations in higher education, it is always smart to be observant and flexible when new changes occur.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Most member institutions will soon be involved in distance learning. The Western Region of responsibility covers the far-off populations of several islands in the Pacific Ocean. The people could immensely benefit from having brought to them excellent programs that would otherwise not be available.

Another issue calls attention to the fact that distance education in and of itself is affecting the learning process--study, reflections, and inquiry. However, the content remains the same in the hands of the faculty. The best way to respond is to stay informed and engaged with the institutional culture regarding teaching and learning, partner with the faculty in assessing lessons learned, and follow patterns, trends and outcomes that could be useful in setting new policy.

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges

Northwest predicts that distance education will be a catalyst for innovation and will soon be perceived as simply one point of an expanded selection of options available to the student. Although this will cause more work for the commission, the challenge is welcomed because the focus placed on distance education forces an opportunity to deeply define and discuss teaching and learning practices.

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools

Middle States claim that distance learning will continue to be made available at most institutions at varying degrees, and that the challenge will be for the accrediting bodies to determine if the education opportunities and services are comparable to the

traditional classroom experience. Student learning outcomes will be the major factor, and that means that some of the accreditation processes that agencies use in evaluation will have to change.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The problem addressed in this research was: What are the higher education accrediting standards for distance learning? This chapter reviews the purposes and findings of the study, then draws conclusions, and finally, makes recommendations on the current policies of distance education accreditation.

A review of the literature indicated an attempt of the accrediting commissions to be proactive rather than reactive in the distance education revolution. The first part of the innovation came in the form of telecoursing, which led to the first major study in distance education accreditation known as Project ALLTEL. Later, with the Internet explosion, the U.S. Department of Education funded a project that led to the fundamental standard of distance education principles known as the Principles of Good Practice, or the WICHE principles. The regional accreditation commissions agreed to an extension of the principles known as the Guidelines for Distance Education, and each use it as a framework for further policy.

Each of the commission's current policies on distance education accreditation was studied. In addition, a survey instrument was sent to all of the regional accrediting commissions for an explanation and justification of their respective current policies. The survey instrument was a modification of a survey created by Danley (1997).

Conclusions

The following conclusions were derived from the results of this study:

1. All commissions rely on the Guidelines for Distance Education, an expansion of the WICHE principles, as the fundamental base for their distance education accreditation policy. Some use it exclusively, while others greatly expand on it with separate guidelines or standards.

2. Current distance education policy is trying to adjust to the recent explosion of web-based instruction, although the foundation of the policy was laid in the early 1980s in response to a growth spurt of instructional television courses.

3. Although the first major study, Project ALLTEL, called for a consistency in distance education accreditation policies, each commission has taken liberties with setting different guidelines along with varying degrees of detail.

4. The largest gap in policy among the commissions currently is whether to accredit the distance programs within the normal institutional review, treat them as separate entities from the normal accreditation process, or a composite of both.

5. All of the commissions agree that distance education is rapidly expanding instead of fading. Although some differ in their level of embracement of the online expansion, each commission is prepared to tackle the issue as a permanent reality. This is a contrast to the telecourse revolution that was seen mostly as a fad.

6. The commissions also agree that flexibility in policy is absolutely essential in adjusting to the constant growth of technology in education. The impact of the next technological breakthrough can be tempered by simply keeping updated on new patterns and trends.

7. Consortium building among institutions is expanding in order to pool resources and to temper the costs associated with distance education. This can pose a challenge when institutions cross regional boundaries to join together if their respective commissions differ in policy.

8. Depending on how they are set up, distance learning courses will require more or less resources than a traditional course. Therefore, comparability is a more relevant factor than equality when discussing one of the commissions key issues of concern – student support services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Since distance learning breaks down regional barriers, more consistency in the regulations are needed among the regional commissions to prevent distance education from being stifled. This can only be accomplished with continued cooperation among the regional accreditation commissions.

2. The commissions were correct in recommending that there should not be a different standard for distance education. However, the commissions should follow the Southern Association's lead in explicitly stating procedures in their policy to ensure that the same quality that is applied to the traditional courses is found in the online course.

a. All commissions should mandate how support services will exist for the distant student.

b. All commissions should include a distant expert in accreditation review.

3. Due to the rapid expansion of the new technology, a symposium should be held every year or so to keep pace with the changing environment, even if it is only held to validate the previous recommendations.

4. Not only should more research be completed in this area; but also research should be done on a regular basis to keep up with the constantly changing policies of the commissions.

5. As distance programs become more prevalent, the evaluative focus of the accreditation review should move from an institutional and classroom structure format to a more useful student learning outcome assessment.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SURVEY INTRUMENT

DISTANCE EDUCATION ACCREDITATION SURVEY
(7 questions)

For the purpose of this survey, Distance Education is defined as a formal educational process in which the majority of instruction occurs when student and instructor are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. Distance education may employ correspondence study, or audio, video, computer, or other communications technology.

1. Has your commission adopted a set of principles called the "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Delivered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs" concerning distance education? If not, does your commission subscribe to another set of principles?

2. Does your commission have separate standards for distance education?

3. How does your commission ensure equality in the accountability of standards for distance education programs? (For example, student support services such as library availability and interaction between students and faculty)?

4. Are there special procedures in dealing with distance education programs with an accreditation review team?

5. What is an issue or concern facing accrediting agencies related to distance education?

6. What role do you predict distance education will play at those institutions your agency reviews in the next decade?

7. How should your agency respond to this future?

APPENDIX B

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

SIU

SIUC HSC FORM A

REQUEST FOR APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

By making this application, I certify that I have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research activities involving human subjects. I agree to comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I acknowledge my obligation to:

1. Accept responsibility for the research described, including work by students under my direction.
2. Obtain written approval from the Human Subjects Committee of any changes from the originally approved protocol **BEFORE** implementing those changes.
3. Retain signed consent forms in a secure location separate from the data for at least **three** years after the completion of the research.
4. Immediately report any adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Chairperson of the Human Subjects Committee, SIUC, Carbondale, Illinois - 618-453-4533 and to the Director of the Office of Research Development and Administration, SIUC - 618-453-4531.

Project Title: Distance Education Accreditation Standards According to the Institutional Accrediting Agencies

Vincent E Flango — 12 May 00
Researcher(s) or Project Director(s) — Date
Please print or type name below signature.

Marcia A. Anderson — 6/1/00
Dr. Marcia Anderson
Researcher's Advisor (required for all student projects) — Date
Please print or type name below signature.

The request submitted by the above-named researcher(s) was approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee.

This approval is valid for one year from the approval date. Researchers must request an extension to continue the research after that date. This approval form must be included in all Master's theses/research papers and Doctoral dissertations involving human subjects that are submitted to the Graduate School.

Robert C. Kaethe — 6/15/00
Chairperson, Southern Illinois University Human Subjects Committee — Date

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APPENDIX C

SURVEY COVER LETTER

As a candidate for the Master of Science in Education Degree at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (Illinois), I am conducting a short survey of Institutional Accrediting Bodies to gather information on your distance education accreditation policies.

The survey should take approximately five minutes to complete. The questions were mostly taken from an instrument used by Dr. Barbara Danley for an independent research study on distance education accreditation policies concerning junior colleges. All responses will remain confidential and will be used exclusively for this research paper. Completion and return of this survey indicates voluntary consent to participate in this study. Should you have any questions concerning this questionnaire, you may contact me at (850) 890-0357 or 3177 Suite A, VooDoo Dr., Panama City, FL 32403.

My academic advisor is Marcia Anderson, Ph.D., Department of Workforce Education and Development, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4605. She may be contacted at (618) 453-1968.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Research Development and Administration, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533.

Your assistance will indeed be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Vincent Flango
3177 Suite A, Voodoo Dr.
Panama City, FL 32403

VITA

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